

Suffolk University

Digital Collections @ Suffolk

Suffolk University Law School Faculty Works

Suffolk University Law School

1-1-1997

New LR&W Teachers Alert! 14 Ways to Avoid Pitfalls in Your First Year of Teaching

Kathleen Elliott Vinson

Suffolk University Law School, kvinson@suffolk.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.suffolk.edu/suls-faculty>

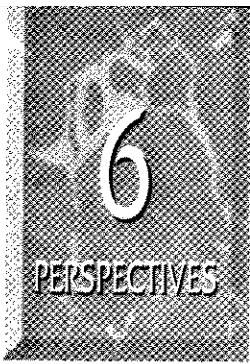


Part of the [Legal Writing and Research Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Perspectives: Teaching Legal Research & Writing, Vol. 6, p. 6, 1997

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Suffolk University Law School at Digital Collections @ Suffolk. It has been accepted for inclusion in Suffolk University Law School Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Suffolk. For more information, please contact dct@suffolk.edu.



Cite as: Kathleen Elliott Vinson, *New LR&W Teachers Alert! 14 Ways to Avoid Pitfalls in Your First Year of Teaching*, 6 *Perspectives: Teaching Legal Res. & Writing* 6 (1997); *reprinted in Best of Perspectives: Teaching Legal Research & Writing* 28 (2001)

.....

NEW LR&W TEACHERS ALERT! 14 WAYS TO AVOID PITFALLS IN YOUR FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING

BY KATHLEEN ELLIOTT VINSON

Kathleen Elliott Vinson is an Instructor in the Legal Practice Skills Program at Suffolk University Law School in Boston, Massachusetts. She completed her first year of teaching in 1996–1997. Although her specific purpose in the following article is to provide guidance and suggestions for new legal writing instructors, experienced teachers will also find new ideas and methods here.

1. Establish Firm Deadlines

Clearly set forth your specifications regarding deadlines (date and time) and place. Notify the students about your deadlines as early as possible.

2. Establish Consequences/ Penalties for Failure to Meet Deadlines

Clearly set forth and explain to students the policy regarding late papers. For example, penalize late papers unless the student has a medical or family emergency. If possible, the student must request an extension before the deadline. Deduct one point from the student's grade for each day or part of a day that the student's paper is late. Unless you determine it is an emergency situation or there are extenuating circumstances, stick to the policy to avoid a slippery slope. If you do give a student an extension, re-establish a firm deadline.

3. Do Not Make Hasty Decisions

When asked by a student about an extension, assignment, recommendation, etc., do not hesitate to use the common response of lawyers: "I'll get back to you." Take time to consider the problem or query. Ask more experienced teachers for their advice on how to handle the matter.

4. Understand the Material and Review It from Your Students' Perspective

If you assign readings to your students, make sure you have done it too. Do not forget what it felt like when you were a first-year law student. Do the

assignments you require your students to complete. Approach the assignment from a student's perspective. This will give you an idea of the time needed to complete the assignment, the level of the assignment's difficulty, and what steps the students need to take to complete the assignment. Also, have another teacher complete your assignments to see if there are any potential problems with it that you may have missed.

5. Pace Yourself

One of the difficulties you may face in your first few classes is the ability to gauge how much material you can cover in the allotted class time. Some teachers may cover all the material prepared for a 50-minute class in 30 minutes. Others may only scratch the surface of the material during the 50 minutes. Keep an eye on the clock during class. Prepare extra material to cover in case you finish early.

6. Set the Context and Explain the Learning Objectives/Goals

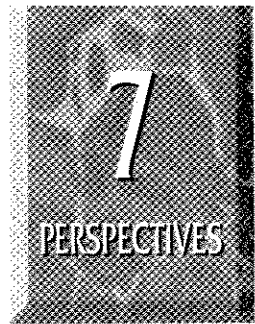
Ground your classes and assignments by setting the context for the students: remind them of what you have covered up to that point and what you will cover in the future. Explain to the students the learning objectives and goals of the assignments. This enables the students to know what the expectations are for the assignment. Review your assignments to make sure they accomplish the goals.

7. Refer Students to Skills Specialists

If your school is fortunate to have some type of academic support program, refer students who are having difficulty with any aspect of your course to a skills specialist as early as possible. Be familiar with the academic support program and the current procedure for making referrals. Follow up on the student's progress by communicating with the skills specialist and the student. Be sensitive so that the students do not feel stigmatized by this referral. Recommend the referral as an *opportunity* to receive more instruction about the subject matter.

8. Keep Good Records/Documentation

The school year can get hectic. Keep a copy of student referrals to skills specialists. Keep a record of the number of absences for each student, late papers or assignments, extensions given to students, etc. Make a file for any students you anticipate may have academic difficulty or other problems. Keep copies of



.....

students' papers that are the best, average, and "need work." Document communications, conferences, and other encounters with difficult students. Organize your lecture notes, handouts, assignments, and other relevant materials in a binder filed chronologically by class.

9. Develop Your Own Teaching Style

Although it is helpful to observe the classroom style of other teachers, you must develop your own approach to teaching. Be yourself. Whatever your style is, keep in mind that all students learn differently. Try to appeal to all the students' senses. Some students need to see the material because they learn visually. Thus, classes where the teacher writes on the board are helpful for these students. Other students can comprehend the material from listening to a lecture. Some students need to reflect on the material outside of class. Thus, handouts are effective. Combine a variety of these teaching methods to reach all your students.

10. Trust Your Instincts and Learn from Your Mistakes

Although it is your first year teaching, do not hesitate to trust your instincts. Learn from any mistakes you have made. It is helpful to engage in self-reflection and critique. After each class, reflect on what was effective and what wasn't, and why. Write down your comments in a log and attach it to your lecture notes. This will assist you in improving your lecture and materials each year.

11. Do Not Obsess When Grading Papers

Skim, without making any corrections or marks, a sampling of the papers to get an idea of the average skill level. Then go back and read each paper thoroughly. Some teachers use a checklist, either written or mental, of the things or skills they are looking for in the paper, to ensure consistency when grading each paper. Make any corrections in pencil. Do not make every correction that is possible: this will overwhelm the student. Put a sticky note with the grade on each paper until you are finished with all the papers. Set aside the first few papers you graded. After you have finished all the papers, go back and reread the first ones again to make sure you did not grade them too harshly or easily.

12. Know the Policies of the School and Legal Writing Program

Read the student handbook that sets forth the policies of the school and the legal writing program regarding completing assignments, late policy, grades, etc. Make sure you are familiar with other policies regarding such things as accommodating students with disabilities, taping classes, copy requests, media services, and school or class cancellation.

13. Be Formal in the Beginning

Err on the side of being formal in the beginning. For example, use the students' last names. You can always loosen up later. If you are too informal in the beginning, it is very difficult to regain respect or formality.

14. Enjoy It

You will not be perfect during your first year of teaching. Your enthusiasm, however, will outweigh your imperfection. The students are perceptive. If you enjoy teaching, they will enjoy learning in your class.❖

© 1997 Kathleen Elliott Vinson